

Genre in a Time of Tyrants: Shostakovich, Stalin, and the *Historia Augusta*

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1. Laws on Magic under Valentinian and Valens

CTh. 9.16.7 Impp. Valentinianus et Valens aa. ad Secundum pf. p. Ne quis deinceps nocturnis temporibus aut nefarias preces aut magicos apparatus aut sacrificia funesta celebrare conetur. Detectum atque convictum competenti animadversione mactari, perenni auctoritate censemus. Dat. V. id. sept. divo Ioviano a. et Varroniano coss.

Let no one hereafter attempt by night to perform illicit prayers, magical devices, or polluting sacrifices. We deem, with our perpetual authority, that one so caught and convicted be afflicted with the appropriate punishment.

CTh.9.16.8 Idem aa. ad Modestum praefectum praetorio. Cesset mathematicorum tractatus. Nam si qui publice aut privatim in die noctuque deprehensus fuerit in cohibito errore versari, capitali sententia feriat uterque. Neque enim culpa dissimilis est prohibita discere quam docere. Dat. prid. id. decemb. Constantinopoli Valentiniano et Valente aa. cons.

Let consultation of astrologers cease. For if anyone, publicly or privately, by day or by night, should be caught involved in the prohibited deception, let both be slain under a capital sentence. For learning it is no less a prohibited fault than teaching it.

2. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, 38 (trans. adapted from NPNF vol. 11)

Ἀνακλᾷ μέρος τῆς σελίδος, καὶ εὕρισκει ἐγγεγραμμένα μαγικά. Συνέβη δὲ κατὰ ταυτὸν στρατιώτην παριέναι. Εἶτα ἔνδοθεν λαβὼν ἀπήει, καὶ ἐπεπήγει τῷ δέει. Τίς γὰρ ἂν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν, ὅτι ἀπὸ τοῦ ποταμοῦ λαβόντες ἀνειλόμεθα, πάντων τότε καὶ τῶν ἀνυπόπτων κατεχομένων; Καὶ ῥῖψαι οὐκ ἐτολμῶμεν, μὴ ὀφθῶμεν, καὶ καταμερίσαι αὐτὸ πάλιν ὅμοιον δέος ἦν. Ἔδωκε γοῦν ὁ Θεὸς, καὶ ἐρρίψαμεν, καὶ ἔσχατον ἀπηλλάγημεν τότε τῶν κινδύνων.

He turns back a part of the page, and finds magic written within. At that very moment it chanced that a soldier came by. Next thing you know, he was going away, searching, and leaving us frozen stiff with fear. For who would have believed that we had picked it up from the river, when all were at that time, even the unsuspected, under strict watch? And we did not dare to cast it away, lest we should be seen, and there was a like danger to us in tearing it to pieces. God gave us means, and we cast it away, and at last we were free for that time from the extreme peril.

3. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 29.1.32 & 40 (trans. J.C. Rolfe)

“ibi tum quaerentibus nobis, qui praesenti succedet imperio, quoniam omni parte expolitus fore memorabatur, et adsiliens anulus duas perstrinxerat syllabas THEO cum adiectione litterae postremae, exclamavit praesentium quidam, Theodorum praescribente fatali necessitate portendi...”

...et post hunc diebus secutis omnium fere ordinum multitudo, quam nominatim recensere est arduum, in plagas calumniarum coniecta, percussorum dexteras fatigavit, tormentis et plumbo et verberibus ante debilitata, sumptumque est de quibusdam sine spiramento vel mora supplicium, dum quaeritur, an sumi deberet, et ut pecudum ubique trucidatio cernebatur.

[a conspirator] “When we then and there inquired, ‘what man will succeed the present emperor’?, since it was said that he would be perfect in every particular, and the ring leaped forward and lightly touched the two syllables ΘEO, adding the next letter, [Δ] then one of those present cried out that by the decision of inevitable fate Theodorus was meant. And there was no further investigation of the matter; for it was agreed among us that he was the man who was sought...

...And after him, in the days that followed, a throng of men of almost all ranks, whom it would be difficult to enumerate by name, involved in the snares of calumny, wearied the arms of the executioners after being first crippled by rack, lead, and scourge. Some were punished without breathing-space or delay, while inquiry was being made whether they deserved punishment; everywhere the scene was like a slaughtering of cattle.

4. Historia Augusta

Life of Tacitus, 15.3–4

futurum autem eum dixerunt a die fulminis praecipitatis staturisque confractis post annos mille. non magna haec urbanitas haruspicum fuit, qui principem talem post mille annos futurum esse dixerunt, pollicentes cum vix remanere talis possit historia quia, si post centum annos praedicerent, forte possent eorum deprehendi mendacia

Moreover, they said that [Tacitus’s descendant] would come one thousand years from the day of the lightning strike and when the statues were broken. This was no great finesse on the part of the soothsayers, who said that so great a leader would come after a thousand years—making promises although such a tale would hardly be able to last—since, if they had predicted it after a hundred years, there might possibly be those capable of catching their lies.

Life of Probus, 24.2–3

sane quod praeterire non potui, cum imago Probi in Veronensi sita fulmine icta esset ita ut eius praetexta colores mutaret, haruspices responderunt huius familiae posteros tantae in senatu claritudinis fore ut omnes summis honoribus fungerentur. sed adhuc neminem vidimus, posteri autem aeternitatem videntur habere non modum.

Of course, something I cannot pass over, when the image of Probus located in Verona was struck by lightning in such a way that its toga changed colors, soothsayers responded that the descendants of his family would come to be of such distinction in the senate that they all would serve in the highest offices. But at this point we have seen none. Moreover, “descendants” seem to have all the time in the world, with no limit.

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